Fathers give suspects' side in Wyoming gay assault

News services

LARAMIE, Wyo. — Matthew Shepard remained comatose Sunday in Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, four days after he was found pistol-whipped and tied to a split-rail fence near Laramie. He was breathing with the assistance of a ventilator.

Two men have been charged with attempted first-degree murder, and their girlfriends are accused of helping them try to hide the incident. Police have said robbery was the main motive.

But the two men accused in the bludgeoning also targeted Shepard, who is openly gay, because he flirted with one of them at a bar, The Denver Post reported Sunday.

Russell Arthur Henderson, 21, and Aaron James McKinney, 22, were charged with attempted murder, kidnapping and aggravated robbery because Shepard's wallet and patent leather shoes were stolen.

Police said they lured Shepard from a University of Wyoming hangout by telling him they were gay.

The two women who allegedly helped the two men dump their bloody clothing reported them to police, reportedly telling police the men made anti-gay remarks. Chastity Vera Pasley, 20, and Kristen Leann Price, 18, were charged with being accessories after the fact.

The two men never set out to nearly kill Shepard, but McKinney was embarrassed that Shepard flirted with him in front of his friends, Price and McKinney's fathers told the Post.

Price admitted she and Pasley initially lied to police about the whereabouts of their boyfriends Tuesday night but said none of the four hate gays.

"It wasn't meant to be a hate crime," she said. "They just wanted to rob him."

The elder McKinney said there's no excuse for the crime but added the media has blown the story out of proportion.

"Had this been a heterosexual these two boys decided to take out and rob, this never would have made the national news," Bill McKinney told the Post. "Now my son is guilty before he's even had a trial."

The attack has prompted an outpouring of support, including from President Clinton, both for Shepard, 21, and for hate-crime laws that specifically include gays and lesbians.

Wyoming is one of 10 states that does not have a hate crime law. The latest attempt died in the state Legislature in Cheyenne in February.

Hospital officials said Shepard suffered hypothermia and a massive injury to his brain stem, which controls such vital functions as heartbeat and body temperature.

Shepard's parents arrived from Saudi Arabia, where his father works in the oil business, Friday evening. They released a statement praising their son as someone whose "one intolerance is when people don't accept others as they are" and pleading for privacy.

Two candlelight vigils were held Sunday night at churches near the University of Wyoming campus where Shepard is a student.

SPRINGS VIGIL

A candlelight vigil will be held at 7:30 p.m. today in Acacia Park, at Platte and Nevada avenues, to protest hate-based violence.

Three Colorado Springs groups organized the vigil in the wake of the beating of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student.

The Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and Metropolitan Community Church are sponsoring the vigil.

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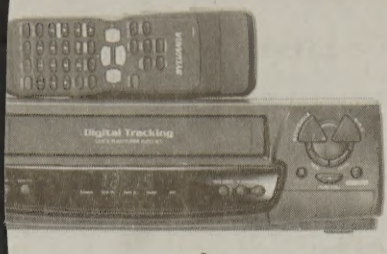

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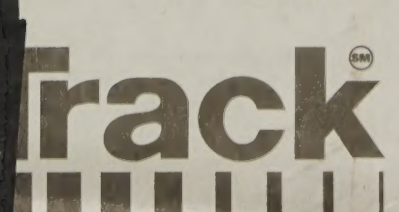

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